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The Modern Museum of Art

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THE MODERN MUSEUM OF ART

Because we have not scheduled our trip to coincide with free Tuesday at the Modern Museum of Art, we buy our tickets, check our coats, and enter. Pretentious in its own way, this is at least not one of those yet more pretentious museums which ask you to make up your own mind how much to pay and then coyly suggest how much you ought to pay. This museum, we are aware as we walk hand in hand across the lobby to the plate glass windows that look out onto the sculpture garden, is forthright and honest in its pretentiousness. It invites you out into its gardens — “enter,” it says, “here” — and the invitation is taken for granted. There’s a couple screwing at the foot of Rodin’s “Homage to Victor Hugo,” for example, and no one but us seems to be paying them the least bit of attention.

I wonder why, says my companion, brushing at her skirt, they have not taken their clothes off.

Well, I speculate, as we lean together watching them, it’s the City, after all, probably they’re afraid everything would be stolen by the time they’re finished.

Hmmmm. We turn. The man confronting himself in that mirrored bit of modernity against the opposite wall, preening, sidling towards an angle that will nestle his image against the image of the naked woman painted on the mirror, is at least no more pretentious than the work of art.

Maybe that’s the nice thing about this museum, she suggests: we’re neither humbled or awed or uplifted by it, we just fit right in here. It’s us.

We turn again, shoulder to shoulder. The couple in the garden is finished. They are admiring Rodin’s paunchy, muscular statuary. If I ask her why she is rubbing her hand on my thigh, the subsequent conversation is obvious. Perhaps we shouldn’t have checked our coats when we came in: this museum may well be us, but possibly we are too much for ourselves. Looking through the window into the

sculpture garden, we can both clearly see certain more extreme possibilities had either the sculptor or his subject been American.

Europe, I announce, protects its statuary.

An enraging fact, she counters, which no doubt explains that vicious attack on the "Mona Lisa" in Japan.

And the desecration of the "Pieta" in Italy, I remind her.

And, she adds, the vituperation of the "Picasso" in Chicago.

Ah, Chicago! We fill our museums with French Impressionist paintings and then claim *we* have culture! With Egyptian tombs! With the masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance! I'm getting worked up.

The thing I like about the restaurant here, she says, leading me off in that direction, is that you can always get a bottle of cold beer.

We stand in the cafeteria line while she fishes through her purse for her wallet, promising that this is "her treat." The same damn thing in music, I tell her, the symphony orchestra plays nineteenth century German Romantics and *we* have culture. Italian Opera! Iced tea, if you don't mind, I have a feeling a beer would give me a headache just now.

She smiles as she pays: Shall I carry the tray?

From our table on the terrace at the edge of the sculpture garden, we can see that nothing much is happening. The pond has been drained: a little more concrete, a little more of the City, exposed. There is a kind of listlessness to the people wandering about among the sculpture, as if they are all moving in slow motion, as if they have all had too much beer to drink, as if they are all behind glass. An extravagant and untouchable malaise. Behind the large plate glass windows facing out onto the sculpture garden from the museum proper stand a man and a woman, leaning in two directions at once, both into each other and into the window, as if they were about to join together in pushing right through it — no, *slipping* through it seems

to be more their intention — into the garden. Their faces are blurred by the glare on the glass, but it is obvious from the tension in their joint posture that they must see something quite remarkable going on in the garden. Each has one arm now about the other's waist, so that when they lean forward with such intensity, each with one arm out against the glass, their heads tilted together, they appear as a single person, seen in a terribly critical act of observation.

Why is he standing there like that, asks my companion, isn't that sort of dangerous?

Who? I ask, looking up, gulping quickly at my iced tea.

That man leaning so hard against the glass, she says, back there, in the museum, or is it a woman? By the time I follow her gaze back past Rodin's "Homage to Victor Hugo" to the plate glass windows, there is no one there. The interior of the museum is too dark to see further into it.

Well, I say most reasonably, if he wanted to get into the garden, there's a door right beside the window, or you can just come around through the restaurant, like we did.

Ah, she says, adopting her most playful and conspiratorial literary tone, perhaps he — or was it she? is it a case of mysterious identity as well? — didn't *want* to come into the garden.

And, says the straight man, why not, pray tell? After all, he — she — they! — were certainly *looking* hard enough.

Ah, she says again, but perhaps what they *saw* there was something both too terrific to encounter more closely and at the same time too fascinating to draw back from.

Like what? I ask, looking around the garden. There is no longer anyone here at all. The tables on the restaurant terrace are all empty, even the sleepwalkers who just moments ago were wandering among the statuary have all gone.

She just smiles, silently, rolling her brown eyes up at me from under her blond bangs: Like us?

O quit it, I blurt out, then quickly add: Are you finished with your beer?

She is, so we rise and walk down into the empty sculpture garden — empty, that is, except for the sculpture, bronze and monumental and untouchable, like Rodin's enormous "Victor Hugo," that most disproportionate of human beings. Inside the museum, in a second floor gallery as I seem to recall from a previous visit, there is another rendition of the same figure in bronze, also by Rodin, but on a considerably smaller scale. In the museum shop you can buy a three inch high replica, also in bronze, which you can clutch in your hand.

The thing about statuary is, I tell her as we wander hand in hand among it, you want to touch it.

You can't, she says, remember? It's European. Rodin? Giacometti? Moore?

To say nothing, I suppose, of the American guards, wherever they are. If you make your culture out of someone else's stuff, then you have to guard it extra closely, because if anything happens to it, you haven't got anything of your own to replace it with. We can only *touch* what's really ours.

That's right, she says, in the empty garden.

But like what? I ask.

O, like us?

Like this? I ask, putting my free hand on her hip.

Like this, she says, hers on mine.

We kiss, very softly, very gently, our hands slide, mine into the small of her back, then down, hers at once around my ass. It's very hot here

in the garden, hot and humid, perhaps that's why all the others have left. We are embracing. I have a slight headache, perhaps from the iced tea. Everything seems slightly fuzzy. Clutching each other tightly, we edge into the shadow of an enormous piece of sculpture, her hand at my fly, mine tugging her skirt up. It's a shame we can't take our clothes off here, but the concrete is so hard. We lean hard into each other. "Victor Hugo" towers over us, untouchable. We sink to the concrete at his base, our hands moving slowly all over each other. Out of the corner of my eye, as we move into each other on this hard surface, I can see that a couple has just come out onto the restaurant terrace. In this sudden heat, in the glare of sunlight on them, flashing off the white concrete, reflected from the plate glass windows, I cannot see what they look like. The woman leads the way, carrying a tray of drinks.